Plot Eyed in Jordan Shooting

Sources say FBI is investigating possible conspiracy by members of racist groups

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The FBI is investigating the possibility of a racist conspiracy in the shooting of civil-rights leader Vernon Jordan, Newsday has learned, and plans to question again an avowed segregationist whom it once considered a prime suspect in the case.

Before Jordan, the executive director of the National Urban League, was gunned down in a Fort Wayne, Ind., parking lot on May 29, a Detroit informant reportedly told the FBI that Duane J. Middleton of Fort Wayne was one of several members of racist and anti-Semitic groups who were planning acts of violence against black leaders.

After the attack on Jordan, an acquaintance told federal authorities that Middleton was a participant in the shooting, sources said.

Middleton, 43, an unemployed railroad worker and the father of five teenage children, was questioned by the FBI and, according to sources, was considered to be a prime suspect in the case. But the FBI reportedly developed no conclusive evidence so far that ties Middleton or anyone else to the attempted murder of Jordan.

In a telephone interview with Newsday last week, Middleton denied any involvement in the crime and said he was home sleeping at the time of the 3 AM shooting.

Middleton was interviewed by FBI agents first at his home about a week after the shooting and again at their Fort Wayne headquarters two weeks ago. Wayne Davis, the FBI agent heading the investigation, said: "We have talked with him twice and we will talk with him again."

The FBI reportedly wants to ask Middleton more questions about his association with several rightist groups that are linked to a national racist umbrella group called the Golden Triangle. Authorities also are checking Middleton's associates to see if any might have been connected with the Jordan shooting.

"The trail is not cold," Davis said, "but we have nothing promising. We have no focus. We are looking at individuals and groups that might be capable of a thing like this.

"We are using the many-pronged approach," he said. "I am fully confident that we will solve the case."

Davis would not confirm or deny the report that a Detroit informant had told the FBI of a racist conspiracy to attack black leaders. But other sources said the FBI, because of legal restrictions on conducting domestic surveillance, is generally hampered in investigating such intelligence unless a crime appears to be imminent or has already been committed.

Jordan was shot in the back after getting out of the car of Martha Coleman, 36, a white member of the local Urban League board of directors. He was transferred from Fort Wayne to New York Hospital June 12, and Dr. Melvin Platt, executive associate director of the hospital, said Jordan's condition continues to improve. But a statement from the Urban League said Jordan's condition will not permit him to attend the league's four-day annual conference, which begins in New York City today. "He continues to run a low-grade fever," Platt said. "His wounds are healing. His spirits and appetite are good and he is gain-

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Vernon Jordan, who is in New York Hospital recovering from gunshot wounds

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ing weight. His doctors are optimistic that he will be ready for discharge in several weeks."

Early law-enforcement efforts in the case focused on some of Mrs. Coleman's acquaintances who they suspected might have been involved in the attack. But while FBI officials said they have not totally ruled out personal rather than political motives for the shooting, the investigation has broadened to center on a growing number of racist groups that advocate violence and are known to be preparing for a future racial confrontation in the United States. One FBI official said the bureau was looking at the Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups with a "similar type of emotional makeup."

In the interview with Newsday, Middleton said: "I never paid any attention to Vernon Jordan before he was shot. I had read a little bit on the Urban League. They advocate integration in a melting pot. This is against the laws of God."

"I wasn't surprised when the FBI visited me," Middleton said. "My views are those of a segregationist. The FBI wanted to know if I shot Vernon Jordan. They wanted to know if I followed him in a vehicle the night he was shot. They asked me if I knew anyone who would be a likely suspect.

"I told them that on the night of the Jordan shooting, I was at home watching TV and the program got so bad my wife and I talked and we went to bed around 1 in the morning."

Middleton says he was a member of the John Birch Society but was invited to leave it in 1969 because he was too radical. Since the Jordan shooting, he has been associated with the Christian Conservative Church of America. The church and several other self-described "white Christian" groups are reportedly associated with the Golden Triangle, which Middleton said is pledged to preserve as a white heartland the area described by a triangle with points in Ontario, Dallas and Miami.

Between 1971 and 1978, Middleton said, he lived in southwestern Missouri and was a member of a segregationist group in Shell City called The Church of Our Christian Heritage.

"It is a right-wing church that believes in segregation," he said. "They believe that in order to uphold Christian principles, the races must be kept separated. They believe in separate worship, separate schools, separate everything."

Middleton said church members would not have been involved in an act like the attempted murder of Jordan. Church members do not engage in paramilitary training activities, he said, though the group instructs its members that "everyone should have firearms in their private homes for self-protection."